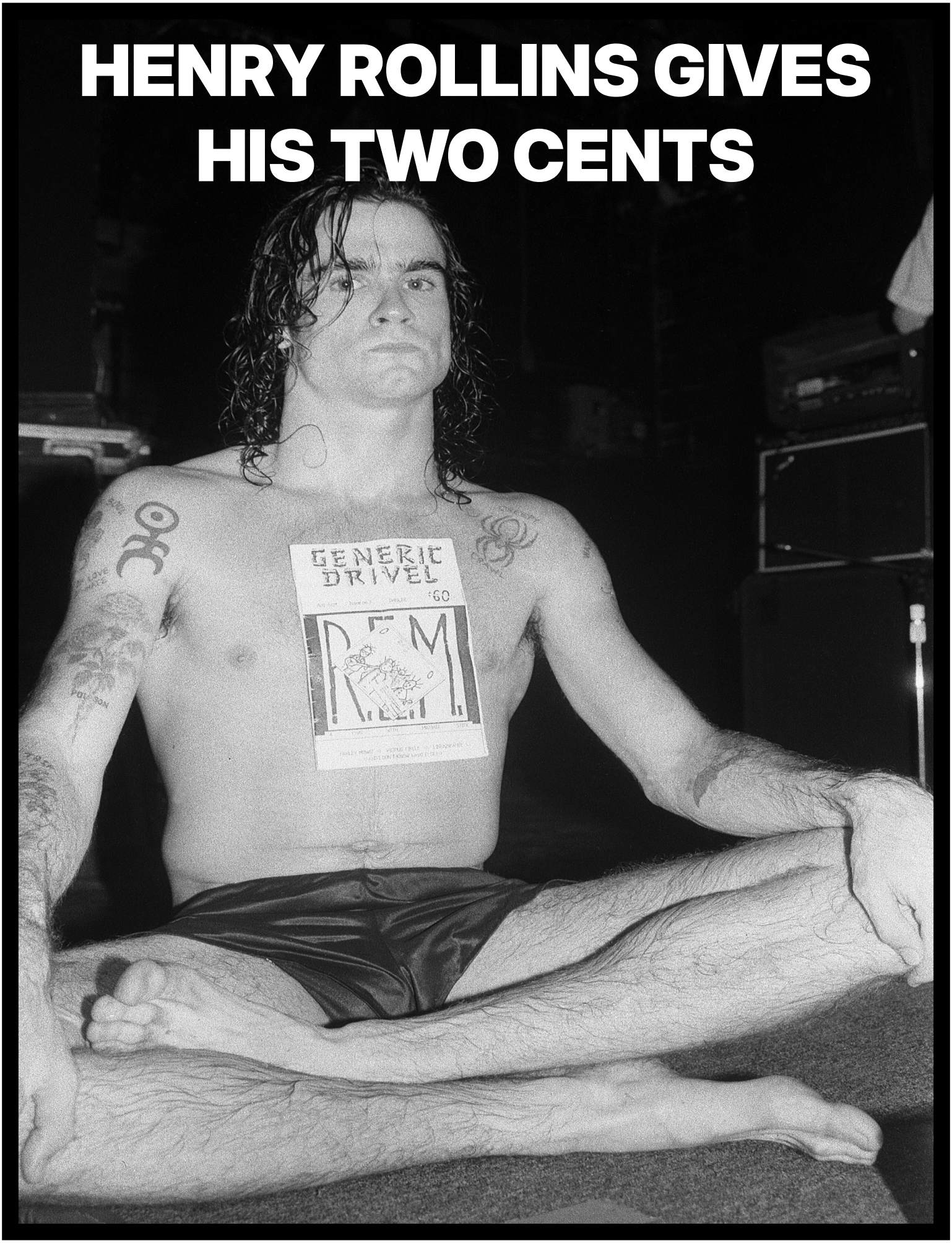
# HENRY ROLLINS GIVES HIS TWO CENTS




BEV DAVIES

**EJ = Espen Jaeger**
HR = Henry Rollins
*Email Interview – 7 December 2025*

**EJ: Rock and roll once had an edge that could feel raw, vulgar, and peculiar. Back then, Elvis only needed to shake his hips to shock audiences. Today, it often seems to take extreme imagery or theatrics just to get a similar reaction. Do you think rock can still unsettle people in a meaningful way, or has our desensitized culture made that nearly impossible?**

HR: I'm not sure of the power that rock music might have to, as you say, unsettle people in a meaningful way. I don't know that western culture has necessarily become desensitized as much as hyper-stimulated, expertly targeted and micro-marketed. Every possible tastebud in the human palate has been addressed and is assiduously serviced. A lot of money and research goes into flavor and texture. From French fries to pizza crust, the objective is to pleasure and re-attract perpetually. You could also call it addiction.

I think that over the decades, every possible thing has been done on a rock music stage; fire, flight, simulated execution, and whatever else can be thought up, probably has been done. I think it can be said that audiences have been groomed over the years to expect spectacle. Whatever can be considered outrageous one year is lightweight by the following year.

I'm not one who thought the purpose of live music was to shock or unsettle the audience. I'm not against them. I am for them, and therefore, shock value has no value for me. When you see what a young person can find online, from pornography to high resolution images of body parts mixed in with luggage from a jumbo jet crash, I don't know what could possibly unsettle or shock a young person now. I also think that disturbing someone for the sake of disturbing them is a "cheap high" and doesn't necessarily inspire. For me at least, rock music has always been about empowerment, expression, and communication.

**EJ: What would you say to the youth of today who are overwhelmed by the despair of AI, environmental tipping points, political upheaval, and the sense that the world is spiraling out of control?**

That's a good question. I don't know if I could necessarily speak in a language that would be understandable or useful to young people.

The world I was young in is very different from the one that you're presently being young in. The Internet, artificial intelligence, the strange version of socialization that's a result of texting, email, social platforms, etc., I think have drastically changed the landscape. As far as despair that a young person might be feeling, I believe them.

I don't know if I could be of help, but it might be a good idea, to at least try to maybe not engage in so much time spent on social platforms and monitoring the movements of others via the short videos they make and not spending so much time fixated upon yourself making "content" for others. It might lead a young person to consider themselves differently. My company has a Facebook page. We announce tours and book releases on it. There's a woman who runs it for the company. Believe it or not, I don't know how to get on Facebook and I'm not completely sure of what it does. I have no interest whatsoever. I think a lot of that is a complete waste of time and ultimately you end up serving someone else.

There's a lot to do in a life. Places to go, books to read, thoughts to think and so on. I think modern culture leads to incredible amounts of isolation, ironically caused by so much interconnectivity, and cruelty, derived from being able to hide while hurting others. I think the Western world is now a very complex environment. Simplicity, strength, generosity, and gratitude are major forces and inspirations in my life. Most of the rest of it I'm doing just fine without.

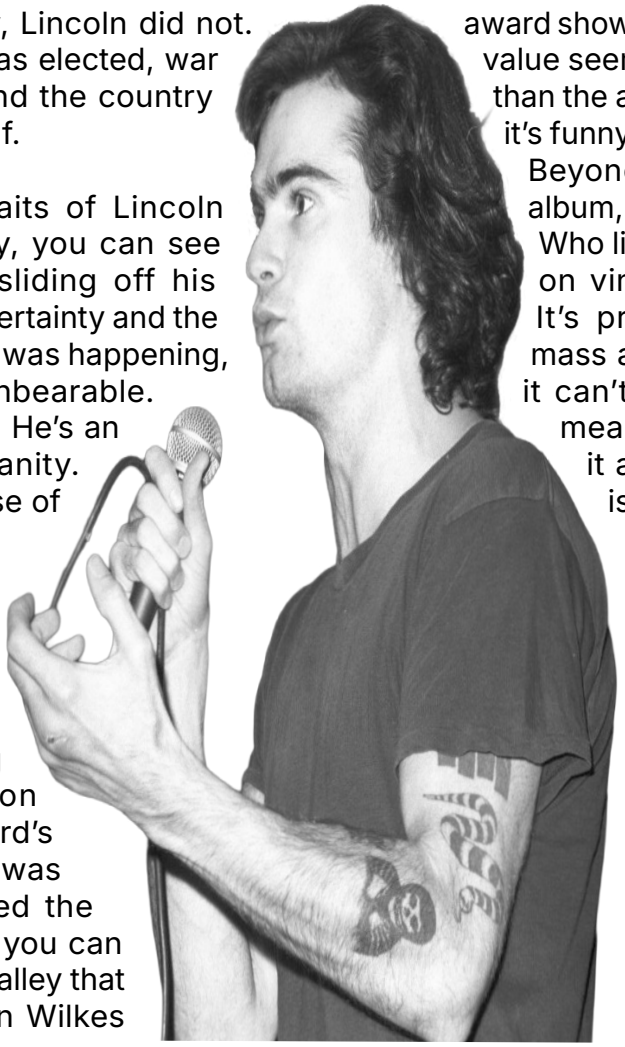
**EJ: You often quote and reference President Lincoln. Given that he faced a very difficult childhood and you've spoken about challenges in your own early life, is that similarity part of why he inspires you?**

HR: The short answer is no. I can find no parallels between my life and that of Abraham Lincoln's. I admire what he did with his life, short as it was. I might have it wrong, but from reading his speeches and biographies about him it seems to me that he genuinely wanted to, as they say, "lift all boats with the tide" and if you read his speeches, they speak to the sophisticated as well as in those days, what would have been semi-literate to illiterate people. He also believed in the concept of all the states being united.

As you know, a very awful war was fought over that. Somehow, the Union and the Constitution both survived but sadly, Lincoln did not. Almost as soon as he was elected, war broke out in America and the country basically tore itself in half.

In those famous portraits of Lincoln taken by Mathew Brady, you can see Lincoln's face almost sliding off his skull. The stress, the uncertainty and the sheer awfulness of what was happening, must've been all but unbearable. Yet, Lincoln persevered. He's an amazing study in humanity. He also had a great sense of humor.

In school, I was never taught much about Lincoln. So, as an adult, I got some books and educated myself. Living in Washington, DC, on school trips I visited Ford's Theater, where Lincoln was assassinated and visited the room he died in. I think you can still go to that room. The alley that Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth ran up after shooting him, is the same alley that you drive down to load into the old 9:30 Club, a venue in DC. As you load your gear in, you can see the doorway that he escaped from. It's a pretty sobering visual.



Working on a history documentary, I was allowed to look at the fragment of bullet extracted from Lincoln's head. It goes on display now and then but I got to see it on a shelf in a storage unit. I stared at it from inches away. It's such a small, angry piece of shrapnel.

**EJ: Do you think style has started to matter more than sincerity in music today?**

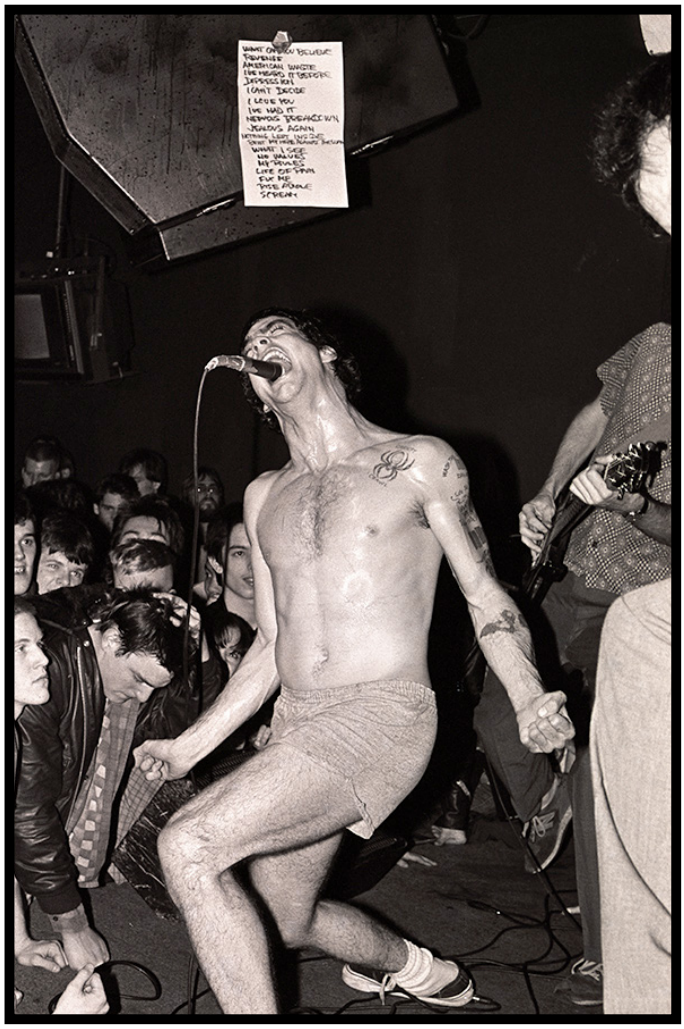
HR: Perhaps to some, but the music I listen to, a lot of new music, it sounds completely sincere to me. I think when you see the more mainstream acts, the ones who perform on award shows, the style and production value seems to have more presence than the actual music. I always think it's funny when a massive artist like Beyoncé will put out a double album, 180g, audiophile pressing. Who listens to that kind of music on vinyl? It's fast food music. It's product, stylized to have mass appeal. Doesn't mean that it can't be good and it doesn't mean that the people making it aren't sincere but its goal is different.

I think there's always been music like that, though. It's not the kind of music I listen to or put on my radio show. Just my opinion, but I don't think independent music has been better than it has been for the last several years. I think there's great music coming out of young people all over the world all the time.

Many of those mainstream acts, believe it or not, I've never heard them. I went online and actually listened to a Taylor Swift song recently. It was the first time I've ever heard one of her songs all the way through. I heard part of one at a truck stop several years ago.

**EJ: Black Flag's logo and visual identity became iconic in punk culture. How do you see the influence of that design on fashion and visual culture, and how does it connect to your own personal style today?**

HR: I remember, there were quite a few years when I would see the Black Flag logo tattooed on people. I don't see it very much anymore. I think it's like a lot of cultural sign posts. It's around for a while and then people get their fill, another generation comes along and what was is replaced with what is. I don't know if the symbol has any relevance or impact with anyone at all. It might, but it would be at this point with a certain age group. A 15-year-old, perhaps might've heard of Black Flag, but I don't know if they could name any song title. I think almost everything gets moved on from.



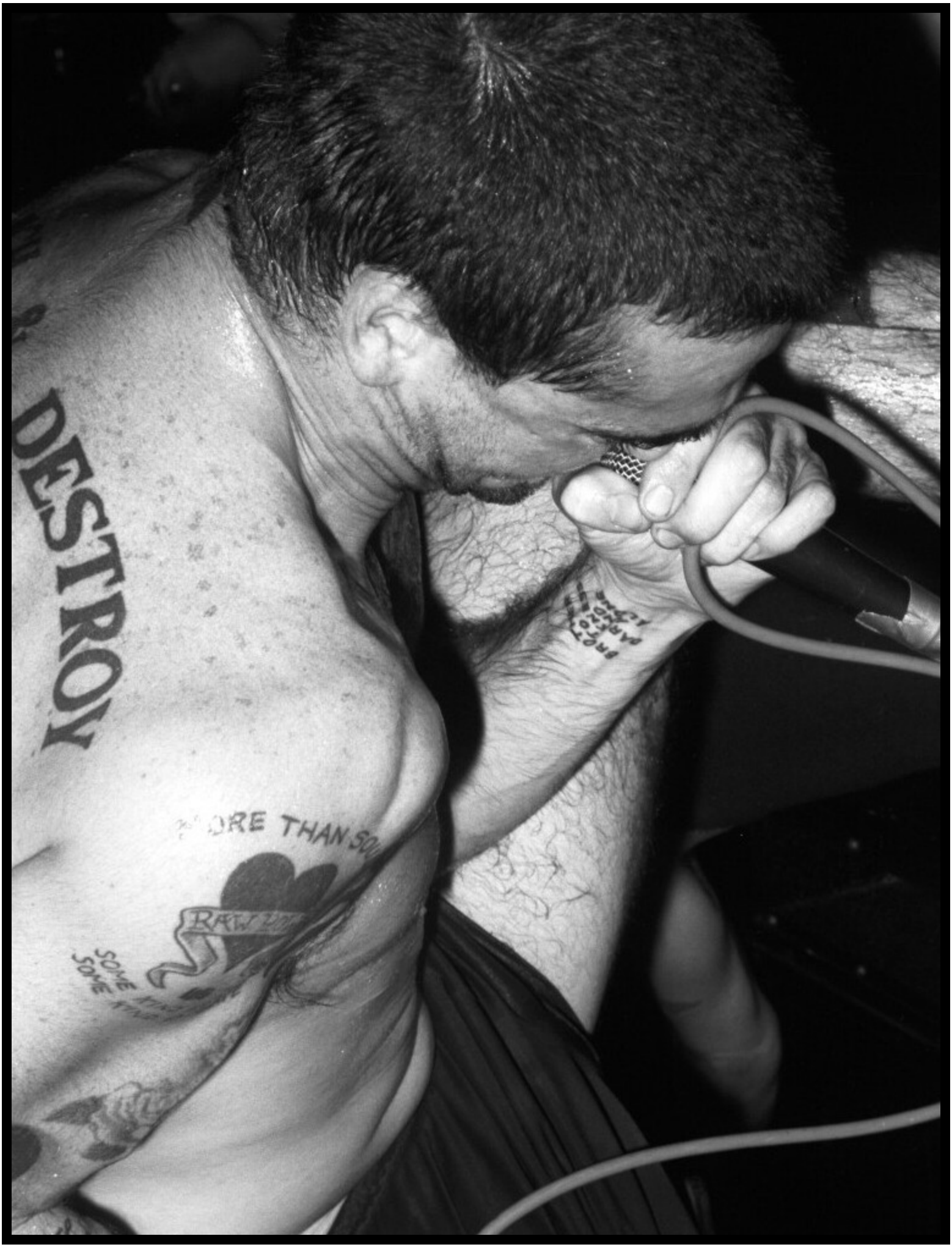
Black Flag, 9:30 Club, Washington, D.C., 2/3/1983.

Photo by: @jimsaah

As far as music, bands, like the Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin or The Beatles, will always be around to some extent. A band like Black Flag is microscopic when compared to those bands. It means a lot to me, because I was in it, but that was a long time ago. I'm not interested in living in the past. It's depressing. I don't mind studying the past, but I'm okay with some things being over with and other things beginning.

An interesting thing started happening to me years ago. Places I used to live in, work in or go to, for whatever reason, started disappearing. The building would either get pulled down or repurposed to such a degree that it was unrecognizable when compared to its former self. When I would visit Washington, DC, where I come from, I'd walk past these places and see if I felt anything. Nothing would come up. I walked by some of these landmarks about two months ago. It was a good walk, the weather was great, but seeing these old places, if they were there at all, just reminded me that many of the people who I used to see in them like bosses or my parents, are all dead.

I'm fine with the past being the past. Perhaps I'm putting too long a tail on this particular kite. The Black Flag logo. Created by Raymond Pettibon, the great artist. He came up with the name for the band as well. To this day, he's still an amazing artist. Always working.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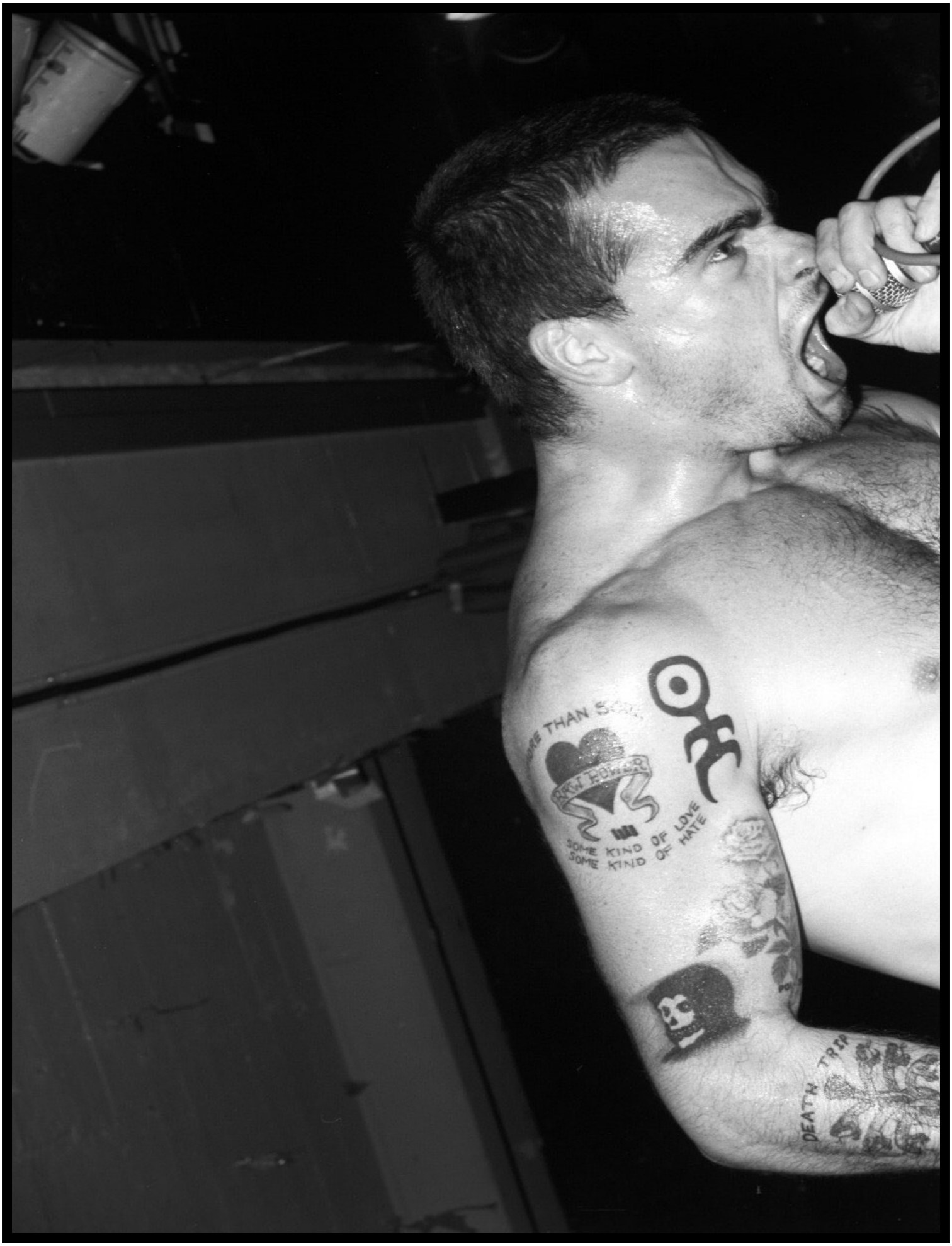
SOME KIND OF LOVE
SOME KIND OF HATE
DEATH TRIP

**EJ: You've mentioned to fans that you don't want to tour every year just to repeat the same stories or jokes, saying it would feel like ripping people off. After taking time off, how do you decide when it's the right moment to perform or share your work live again? Will it take new experiences, such as your love for traveling, to find fresh material?**

HR: Exactly. By pushing myself out into the world, that's where the material comes from. I think it would be lazy to go out and tell the same stories I did on previous tours. I would never tell anyone how to do their thing, but for me, I must put the time and effort in to get material that I think can stand on its own. Basically, I feel the need to earn my material. Hauling yourself across Central Asia, or parts of Africa, it forces you to experience. You are unable to avoid realities that are much different than your own.

I just wish I was more popular and could do more shows. I've always admired those famous comedians who could do two weeks in one location. Every time I'd be in Las Vegas for a show, I'd look up on the boards at the casinos, and see these comedians, like George Carlin doing several nights. I always wanted that, for a tour to be more like 450 shows rather than the 300 and some that I usually do over a two year period. I would never want an audience to think that I was merely in front of them to take their money. Believe it or not, the financial aspect of touring is the last thing I think about. For me, it's all about doing something good while on stage. I think you might find that most performer types, perhaps the overwhelming majority of them are far more concerned about doing a good show than how much they're getting paid.

I found that as far as the time between tours, is about four years. I used to go out every other year, but I think it's better to give audiences more of a break from me. If I was more popular. I'd be fine with just living on the road pretty much nonstop. I like it better than being in a house.

**EJ: With the institutionalized disdain for the arts, and with creatives often seen as less serious, do you think society's focus on STEM has sidelined creativity?**

I don't think science, technology, engineering, and mathematics has necessarily sidelined creativity but the desperation one might naturally feel in a rural or urban setting, to make the proverbial buck doesn't really lend itself to creative thinking, unless it is STEM-related, like building platforms like X or Facebook.

As far as making a living by being creative, that might be pretty difficult. I think there are a combination of adverse factors in this. People pay money to buy a ticket to go to a show. That's money they're not spending on groceries, electricity, petrol, mortgage or their children. No one needs to buy a painting or go to a show, or buy a record. When you can get so much music for free online, music literally becomes devalued.
Actually buying a record or a download, the consumer or fan might be disincentivized.

For many years, I've taken issue with people who insult other people who they don't think read enough. At this point, at least in the United States, having the time to read a book, to sit still, and quietly read, there are millions of Americans who simply do not have the time.

So, reading, and appreciation of art or culture is becoming more and more for the elite. Kind of like how the United States started. There were the landed gentry, who were usually also slave owners, who had the time to read and quite often were the only ones for miles who were literate. If you were a slave or white working poor, chances are you didn't have the time or money to see a performance. That's why a lot of music was written by people who worked and played to members of their family or work crews before they fell exhausted into their beds.